

## ***The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD)***

### **Maryland's Legal Aid Bureau: A national leader.**

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When it comes to nationally ranked institutions in Maryland, several come to mind: the Terps, the Johns Hopkins University and the Baltimore Symphony, just to name a few.

Here's another one to add to the list: the Legal Aid Bureau, founded in 1911 and today recognized nationally for its leadership in providing civil legal services to the poor.

"In terms of delivery of service, innovation, and diversity in leadership, the Legal Aid Bureau is in the forefront of programs around the country that promote access to justice," said Martha Bergmark, senior vice president for projects at the National Legal Aid and Defender Association in Washington, D.C.

"Maryland has a lot to trumpet," Bergmark added. "The Legal Aid Bureau has become a lead player in the justice community by building partnerships with other organizations, the courts and the media: all critical components to make justice available to all in Maryland."

John A. Tull, a private consultant in Colorado who has worked with legal services organizations for more than 30 years and is a former vice president of the national Legal Services Corp., said Legal Aid "really stands out for its remarkable sense of commitment to make a difference in the lives of its clients."

That's particularly noteworthy because of the tenor of the times for legal services, Tull added, noting that funding concerns and Congressional restrictions could dampen zealous and creative advocacy.

For academic recognition, you don't have to go far.

"Legal Aid now offers some of the most creative services for legal aid found across the country," said Michael A. Millemann, a law professor at the University of Maryland and a former deputy director of the Multnomah County, Ore., Legal Aid Service. "It has state-of-the-art intake and has recruited some excellent lawyers to its staff."

A private, nonprofit law firm with 13 offices around Maryland, the Legal Aid Bureau boasts a \$15 million annual budget, nearly 300 employees (more than 140 are lawyers) and handles more than 50,000 cases a year. The Bureau, headquartered in Baltimore, is the cornerstone of civil legal services in the state.

The person responsible for propelling the Bureau into the front rank of legal service providers nationally was executive director Charles H. Dorsey Jr., who led the organization from 1974 until his death in 1995.

Under Dorsey Co who grew up in segregated Baltimore, was the first black graduate of Loyola College and the first black attorney to serve on the state Board of Law Examiners Co the Bureau expanded into a statewide law firm that reached out to the rural as well as urban poor.

Dorsey was also a driving force behind Legal Aid's downtown Baltimore headquarters, the first in the U.S. specifically designed and built to house a legal services operation. Building on the foundation established by Dorsey is Wilhelm H. Joseph Jr., who became executive director in 1996.

Millemann, who worked at Legal Aid for three years beginning in the late 1960s, said Joseph "has exceeded my expectations of what's possible by 500 percent. He's attracted good people, generated enthusiasm, and gained the respect of the bar and the law schools."

One indication of that success is funding. To raise money from the private bar, Joseph created the Equal Justice Council, spearheaded today by retired Piper Rudnick managing partner Decatur H. Miller.

The result? Since 1996 Legal Aid has increased its annual revenue by \$6 million, renovated all of its offices and increased staff salaries Co which helps explain why 7 out of 13 chief (or managing) attorneys around the state are former Legal Aid lawyers who returned after stints in private or government practice.

The beneficiaries of the improvements are Legal Aid's clients, who include residents of subsidized and public housing, the elderly, migrant farm workers, and neglected and abused children. Examples of this bread-and-butter work include highly contentious custody disputes, cases involving sub-standard housing and loss of shelter, and the loss of disability and other health benefits, to name a few.

The Bureau's major objectives are to increase economic stability of its clients, preserve affordable housing, and stabilize families and communities. Yet the Bureau's efforts go beyond helping individual clients. Those objectives include making changes in systems that affect the poor.

For example, one ongoing project (funded by the Abell Foundation) works to decrease employment barriers to 45,000 non-custodial fathers in Baltimore whose child-support obligations (especially money owed to the state) exceed their ability to pay.

"Current child support policies are driving many of them out of the above-ground economy," said Hannah E. M. Lieberman, the Bureau's director of advocacy. "Without change, we're consigning another generation to entrenched poverty."

Another example: housing preservation. Under a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Legal Aid is helping thousands of low-income Marylanders living in properties where federal subsidies are about to run out.

In Annapolis, the Bureau's 20-year representation of the Bloomsbury public housing project resulted in a victory that will result in the relocation of residents Co many of them elderly and disabled Co to new waterfront housing that will keep the last black neighborhood in the city intact.

"Instead of moving to a remote area far from jobs, shopping, schools and public transportation, the residents will move a block to new housing that will conform to historic-area building standards on a former parking lot on College Creek," said Janet LaBella, chief attorney of the Bureau's Anne Arundel County office.

While Legal Aid's efforts historically have been aimed at helping the poorest of the poor Co because of funding limitations, only about 20 percent of eligible potential clients are served Co some recent technological innovations will also help meet the civil legal needs of both low- and moderate-income folks.

In partnership with the Maryland Legal Assistance Network, a project of the Maryland Legal Services Corp., the Bureau is developing a centralized intake and referral system for all legal service providers around the state Co in other words, a legal hotline with one-stop shopping.

The effort, now in the final months of a \$1 million grant received by MLSC three years ago from George Soros' Open Society Institute to create a national demonstration project, is the largest foundation grant ever to a state legal services organization.

Other MLAN projects include a Web site for the general public called the Peoples Law Library ([www.peoples-law.org](http://www.peoples-law.org)) that increases public access to legal information and legal pro se assistance for a variety of common legal problems. Another Web site, [www.MDJustice.org](http://www.MDJustice.org), assists legal services and private pro bono lawyers to better serve low- and moderate-income clients.

The bottom line? It's Legal Aid's commitment to justice.

"We at the Bureau have the most exciting and satisfying jobs in the world," said Joseph, the Bureau's executive director. "In a society that stresses individual achievement Co where you pull yourself up by your bootstraps Co the Legal Aid Bureau helps those without boots.

"By providing access to justice to tens of thousands of Marylanders each year, Legal Aid attorneys and support staff bring equity and stability to society."

*Robert J. Rhudy is executive director of the Maryland Legal Services Corp. He can be reached at [rhudy@mlsc.org](mailto:rhudy@mlsc.org). Joe Surkiewicz is the director of communications at the Legal Aid Bureau. His email is [jsurkiewicz@mdlab.org](mailto:jsurkiewicz@mdlab.org).*